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201436Z Dec 05

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 007016

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/20/2015

TAGS: [PGOV IS ELECTIONS GOI INTERNAL](#)

SUBJECT: NETANYAHU LEADS A WEAK, RIGHT-LEANING LIKUD AS  
SUPPORT FOR KADIMA PROVES RESILIENT

REF: TEL AVIV 6920

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Gene A. Cretz for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

1. (C) Summary: Newly elected Likud Party Chairman Binyamin Netanyahu will likely call for a party decision as to whether Likud should quit the government, and may still try to recruit 61 MKs to create an alternative government to avoid early elections. Observers assess that the latter has little chance of succeeding (reftel), and the former may face opposition by Likud ministers who want to keep their seats at least until the January 3 Likud Central Committee votes on Likud's Knesset list. Netanyahu, who obtained some 44 percent of the vote according to unofficial election results in a particularly low voter turnout of 44 percent, was consistently favored in the polls, although second runner-up Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, who garnered 33 percent support, had narrowed the gap towards the end of the race. Right-wing settler leader Moshe Feiglin received 12 percent of the vote, leading some in Labor and Kadima to characterize Likud as a right-wing party. Pollsters note that a greater percentage of Feiglin supporters went to the polls. Netanyahu has a long road ahead to build up Likud after it has been severely weakened by the exodus of some 15 of its members to join Prime Minister Sharon's centrist Kadima party, which, despite Sharon's December 18 mild stroke, still leads in the polls by a wide margin. End Summary.

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Netanyahu At the Helm  
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2. (C) Advisor to Likud MK Moshe Kahlon told Poloff December 20 that the Likud Party faction will meet December 20 and will likely discuss whether to propose a party vote on quitting the government and whether and how to proceed with an initiative to recruit 61 MKs to form an alternative government. Likud MK and former prime minister Netanyahu had announced during his campaign that one of his first acts as Likud Chairman would be to remove his party from Sharon's government in order to separate Likud from Kadima and prepare for elections. The Likud Central Committee would have to approve such a move and, if approved, the remaining four Likud ministers -- Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, Education Minister Limor Livnat, Agricultural Minister Yisrael Katz, and Health Minister Danny Naveh -- would then resign. Sharon would then be left with only eight ministers out of an original unity government comprised of more than 20 ministers. As of December 9, Sharon can appoint new ministers from among Knesset members to fill vacated seats with only Cabinet approval.

3. (C) Ministry of Justice Knesset Liaison Paz Barnett told Poloff December 20 that the Likud ministers will most likely prefer to remain in their ministry seats at least until after the January 3 Likud Central Committee vote on the Likud Knesset list. Likud ministers would rather run as ministers, with the accompanying perks and prestige, than as simple MKs, Barnett assessed. Education Minister Livnat is against Likud's immediate resignation from the government, according to press reports. Barnett said that vacating even more ministries now would mean more work for Sharon, who already is responsible for eight ministries.

4. (C) Embassy contacts in Likud told Poloff during the last two weeks that an informal initiative peddled by some Likud MKs, including Yuval Steinitz, Reuvin Rivlin, and Michael Ratzon, to recruit 61 MKs to form an alternative government would become a formal Likud effort after the December 19 Likud primaries. Steinitz told Poloff December 19 that the initiative will move forward, but Embassy sources have provided no evidence that this threat is credible (see reftel). The Likud Party faction will likely strategize on this initiative at its December 20 meeting. The initiative would have to succeed by December 29, the date of the Knesset's official dissolution.

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Feiglin Showing Taints Likud  
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5. (C) To compete with Sharon for Israel's center, including many current and former Likud supporters, Netanyahu will need

to associate himself more with Likud's center, represented by Silvan Shalom, rather than its right, represented by MK Uzi Landau, and settler leader Moshe Feiglin. Netanyahu has reportedly already reached out to Shalom. After Netanyahu was declared victor of the leadership race, Shalom announced his commitment to remain in Likud and rebuild the party. The Likud Central Committee is reportedly scheduled to meet within a few days and could decide to place Shalom in the number two slot on the Knesset list, after Netanyahu, giving Shalom a reprieve from having to run in the Likud Central Committee Knesset list vote.

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Kadima Still Strong, Despite Sharon's Stroke  
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16. (U) Two polls released December 19 -- taken after Sharon's stroke -- show that the Kadima party would still draw the most support out of all the parties, winning 39-42 Knesset seats if elections were held today. Labor would obtain 21-22 seats and Likud would only muster 13 seats. Both polls were taken before the Likud leadership results were in. In the Dahaf Polling Institute survey, 91 percent responded that Sharon's stroke did not affect their decision as to which party to support. A Teleseker Poll shows that if Sharon is prevented from continuing to lead Kadima, support for the Kadima party would decrease to 30 seats, but Kadima would still be the strongest party.

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